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A Pause in Trend to Bar US from Latin Affairs

Several recent hemispheric meetings have provided a pause in the trend to exclude the US from Latin and Caribbean regional affairs.

The establishment of a broad new organization, the Latin American Economic System, was postponed when numerous critics at the conference in Panama raised the practical problems that the leading proponents—Venezuela and Mexico—have tried to ignore.

The vague principles of the system take no account of the many political and economic differences that divide countries of the area, fail to clarify the system's relationship with existing pacts, and leave open the question of who would bear the burden of special treatment for the least-developed areas.

A working group has been assigned the task of drafting a more specific definition of the organization's goals and structure for presentation at another meeting on October 15.

The fundamental concern of the reluctant governments is that the proposed economic organization's principal goal is precisely what the promoters insist it is not: to pressure the US. The demurring governments are resigned to joining the system eventually in the interests of solidarity, but they are pleased at having won a delay.

The idea of a Latin-only organization fits in with the notions of basic antagonism between the US and Latin America that have been buttressed by frequent wrangling and bitterness. The recent OAS conference at San Jose to amend the Rio Treaty provided a very different perspective on the state of relations.

Latin American ambivalence over interests increasingly at odds with those of

the US and the long-standing tradition of "natural" alliance has been evident mainly in the contrast between the Latins' pragmatic bilateral dealings with the US and their aggressive behavior in multilateral forums.

The meetings at San Jose exhibited the ambivalence en masse. Against a background of repeated accusations of US meddling, influence, and involvement in their affairs, the Latins in effect paid homage to the judgment that their basic security is naturally linked with that of the US.

After a critical two-year review of the Rio Treaty, the Latin governments made only small alterations in the 23-year-old document and endorsed the pact essentially as it was written.

One change corrected a flaw magnified by the Cuban issue—the requirement that sanctions imposed by a two-thirds vote can be removed only by the same margin. Technically, however, the two-thirds rule remains in force until the amendments agreed at San Jose are ratified by two thirds of the signatories.

As an expedient for the interim, the delegates reconvened in San Jose as an "Organ of Consultation," the necessary guise for dealing with sanctions, and voted a "freedom of action" resolution that leaves each OAS member's relationship with Cuba a purely bilateral affair.

General Agreement

Agreement on both the treaty and the sanctions was broad and left the US in company with a near consensus. Only Peru and Panama, on the "leftist" end of the Latin spectrum, remain unhappy with some basic concepts of the Rio Treaty. Uruguay, Chile, and Paraguay, on the "rightist" end, took strong exception to the action on sanctions.

The achievements of the San Jose

meetings put a better face on inter-American relations than they have had in some time. The experience overall demonstrated that, despite the many complaints from Latin America about the role of the US, in matters of hemispheric defense there is a permanent common interest.